

Basic Database Indexing

Criteria for Identifying Databases that Must Be Indexed

The public records law defines a *database* as “a structured collection of data or documents residing in a database management program or spreadsheet software. ” Under the law, databases created, compiled, or newly compiled (significantly changed) after certain dates must be indexed. However , not all changes are considered *significant*. Based on a February 26, 1996, advisory interpretation of N.C.G.S. § 132-6.1(b) by Senior Deputy Attorney General Ann Reed and Special Deputy Attorney General Charles J. Murray , **the addition of new data to existing data fields does not represent the compilation of a “new” database and does not, in itself, subject the database to mandatory indexing.** (See question 2 below.)

N.C.G.S. §132-6.1 (b) directs that the Division of Archives and History , in consultation with officials of other agencies , develop the form, content, language, and guidelines for the index and the databases to be indexed. The division and the Advisory Committee on Electronic Records (ACER) have noted two important issues not directly addressed in the new legislation but which must be considered by agencies in determining whether a particular database must be indexed:

1. Must all new databases be indexed?

This question exists because the division and ACER find that the indexing of certain new databases would appear to serve no practical public interest and , indeed, would be counterproductive of legislative intent and general efforts to improve public access to state and local electronic records. Generally speaking , a new or newly compiled database or spreadsheet must be indexed if it meets either of the following criteria:

- Provides primary data supporting the conduct of agency business—serves as the master catalog, file, or inventory listing for agency entities , events, processes, or transactions.
- Contains legal, administrative, fiscal, or historical records, as determined by the agency’s retention and disposition schedule , that would otherwise be recorded on an enduring medium (e.g. , microform or paper)—records that have obvious long-term value or that otherwise would merit the expense of microform.

The division believes that indexing should be required for any new or newly compiled old database that meets all of the following criteria:

- The data records exist within the context of a database or spreadsheet program. Individual documents or data files grouped together for ease of access do not constitute a database.